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Moyra Davey, Kevin Ayers (Psychic), 2013. 1 of 26 C-prints with tape, postage, ink, 30 × 45 cm each.
Courtesy: Murray Guy, New York.

Moyra Davey: Hangmen of England

Tate Liverpool, 8. 6. – 6. 10. 2013

by Martin Herbert

Interlacing her own family life with larger cultural histories, as well as adumbrating the passage of time, is familiar ground for Moyra Davey: see, for example, her feature-length video “The Goddesses” (2011, not included here), which mixes memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft and Davey’s sisters respectively, seen—in filmed photographs—in the post-punk finery they wore in their youth. The exhibition “Hangmen of England”, while following this tack, is deeply locale-specific, as the Canadian, New York-based artist has genealogical ties to the northwest of England. Housed in a vitrine, “Walking” (2013) is inspired by British artist Jeremy Deller’s “Shaun Ryder’s Family Tree” (2008), which traces back the genealogy of the Manchester-based Happy Mondays singer: a work about “barely surviving, and finally, luck”, writes Davey in an accompanying text. Her own family, “also of modest origin”, comes from just north of Liverpool. Her grandfather, seen striding along in one of this work’s spread of archive photos, signed on as a cook on a ship bound for the Americas and jumped off in New York; in another photograph appears his son, who would become a political advisor and eventually help Pierre Elliot Trudeau get elected as president of Canada.

Politics—and England—clearly remain in Davey’s blood. “Valerie Plame” (2013), a grid of photographs taken in what appears to be a Liverpool library, were mailed (folded up) to the librarian and forwarded to the gallery; unfolded, they’re pinned to the wall, complete with address labels and the bright strips of coloured tape that sealed them. The series is led off by an image of a newspaper cutting, written a decade after the onset of the second Iraq war, by the eponymous former CIA officer who was outed as a spy by the White House after her husband spoke out against the invasion. The US and UK are linked by their Middle East adventuring, of course, but Davey muddies things associatively, bringing in monetary values and witch hunts, by including, among images from her library research, the covers of books such as *Hangmen of England* and *The Witch of Wall Street*, about a notorious miser.

There is a Sebaldian drift to Davey’s linking of happenstances. She read Plame’s piece, she writes, in the *Guardian* newspaper on the way back to New York from Liverpool; on the way there, she’d seen the obituary in the *New York Times* for English singer-songwriter Kevin

Ayers. “Kevin Ayers” (2013), another series of mailed chromogenic prints, features glowing, warm-toned photographs taken in English record shops: bearded and hatted guys carefully and lovingly examining used vinyl, plus a newspaper clipping of the obit in which a historical quote from Ayers reads: “I think the clever people are the ones who do as little as possible.” Who don’t speak out against injustice, maybe? Davey, surely seeing the irony, lets it hang.

What unites this work, clearly, is how the past lingers—hangs—for better or worse. Indeed, so much of Davey’s work seems to concern how we materialise the traces of time. “Copperheads 101–200” (2013), a third set of mailed images, features the closely photographed surfaces of American coins, the profile of Abraham Lincoln scarred and greened by the years. It is hard not to think about this in literalist terms: about what has happened to America and American values since Lincoln’s time, about the changing meaning of the close ties between the UK—where Liverpool, of course, was once a thriving port city and major point of transit between the two—and America. Davey doesn’t point this out, doesn’t need to. Instead, she mentions things like the fact that, while working on the show, she was listening to Bonnie “Prince” Billy’s “I See A Darkness” (a record-lover is seen fondling a record by the same artist in “Kevin Ayers”) and PJ Harvey’s scathing “Let England Shake”. Inevitably, it is in the gaps between exegeses that the show lives. What Davey assembles in “Hangmen of England”, with deceptive casualness, is a lattice of chancy and deliberate connections big enough for multiple theses—on historical shifts, on the articulacy of poetry, on contingency as meaning—to live and breathe within.